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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relative effects of the self-evaluation process on written composition skills development among learning-disabled junior high students. It specifically evaluated the use of a structured self-evaluation process on the quality of short compositions. Experimental subjects (N=38) were taught the use of a self-evaluation checklist grid. Both experimental and control subjects (N=20) were instructed in written composition principles implied in the self-evaluation grid. Comparisons of compositions before and after training showed significantly higher mean ratings (by independent evaluators) of the introductory statements and somewhat better organization of ideas in compositions written by experimental subjects. The self-evaluation grid itself is included in the paper. (17 references) (DB)

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Effects of self-evaluation on written composition skills in Learning Disabled Children

Helen V. Brantley
Donald Small

INTRODUCTION

The efficacy of student self-evaluation in written composition activities has been supported by a number of empirical investigations testing a variety of methods for teaching written skills (Whimbey and Jenkins, 1987; Hyde and Bizar, 1989; Hawley and Hawley 1979). Based upon observations of learning disabled students, Adams (1971) stressed the value of self-monitoring as a source of immediate and effective feedback to the student in written and oral work. Further, (Graser, 1983) outlined several techniques for implementing effective student self-monitoring activities. The underlying assumption of their recommendations is that student labeled learning disabled, despite reminders by the teacher, seldom examine their work for errors before turning the work in for correction. Alley and Deshler (1988) suggest that the teacher return the corrected papers as expediently as possible. This practice, they contend, will provide immediate feedback on errors made while the activity is fresh on the student's mind and serve as a reference for the next assignment.

Some proponents of teaching questioning strategies emphasize the importance of the student's ability to ask relevant questions in conjunction with problem-solving activities in evaluating their work (Strong, Hanson, and Silver, 1986; Whimbey and Lochhead,1986). The prevailing notion is that "good" questions lead to the type of organized thought patterns and valid logical conclusions needed in effective oral and written expression and allows for self-monitoring (Brantley and Washington, 1990). This technique also allows the student to become an active participant during the evaluation process.

It has been a traditional practice for teachers of composition to assume the sole responsibility for identifying desired and undesired elements in students' papers. The effects of this practice may tend to "rob": the student of a valuable learning experience that would cost little more in teacher effort and yield far more in instructional outcome. Permitting the student to evaluate his or her written creation forces the student to identify areas of compliance and noncompliance with the specific rules of written composition and grammar learned prior to writing activities. The teacher's role in the process is to verify the student's evaluation and make note of other points of compliance and noncompliance with the rules. This procedure would result in formative measures of student progress and metacognitive development.

The evaluation process should be designed to provide students with positive feedback for improving future compositions and in improving their writing at their current level of accomplishment. This process should include input from both teacher and student. To correct a

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student's paper or mark his or her errors without an explanation may deprive the student of meaningful learning opportunities. It may be more beneficial to find something good about a paper than to point out faults. In support of this assertion, Dusel (1965) states,

> To strengthen the pupil's motive or interest in writing, teachers should mark to show their respect for the writer as a human being with dignity, with important ideas, feelings, purposes, and potentialities. This they may be able to do best by expressing their interest in the writer's unique view of the world and their desire to understand it ... In order to help the writer to derive the most value from his practice, they should direct his attention toward desirable procedures and away from undesirable ones; and they should keep him informed of his progress (p. 363).

Dusel contends that teachers who are highly critical in marking student papers create negative feedback that results in a lowering of students interest in writing. The student is likely to become intimidated by both the teacher and the task. This intimidation may cause avoidance behavior. Composing a competent essay requires that the student grasp the significance of a skill, practice it, and transfer or generalize it to new learning situations. The student must first be given the incentive to write. Comments such as"looks good," "I like this," "good" serve as positive reinforcement, and should be part of the evaluation process. Research has shown that encouragement by mentors precedes the confidence students acquire. This feedback serves to guide students in discovering their errors and in becoming more aware of effective writing techniques.

Self-evaluation (self-monitoring) describes a perpetual process whereby the novice writer inspects his or her written creations to determine the relative degree to which they conform to the applicable conventions of written composition. Prior exposure to both general and specific rules of grammar and composition is an essential prerequisite to this process. The self-evaluation process describes in this study features, ideally, initial instructional sample passages consisting of embedded "typical" errors in written composition and grammar. Each of the sample passages are mated with at least one corrected version that serves as a model. Annotations may be incorporated to enhance instructional effects. The sample passages also serve as instruction reference stimuli that the teacher may use to reinforce rules of composition and grammar, and as a constant reminder to the student of the specific kinds of errors that must be avoided.

The purpose of this present study was to determine the relative effects of self-evaluation process on written composition skills development among learning disabled junior high students.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the question: Do learning disabled junior high school students who used a structured self-evaluation process in classroom composition activities have a significantly higher final mean rater assessment on short compositions than do learning disabled students who do not use a structured self-evaluation process in classroom composition activities!

Composition skills, in the present study, is based on external ratings in four interrelated components of short composition: (1) INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT, (2) CONTENT, (3) CRAFT and (4) CONCLUDING STATEMENT. Form 1 shows the components of Rater's Evaluation Grid. Based upon the prevailing evidence of previous research, a structured self-evaluation element, incorporated into a well-planned and implemented instructional model for teaching composition, tends to enhance student creativity. The inherit quality of the self-evaluation technique in creating an unthreatening environment for learning and in fostering relearning through checklist reminders increases the probability that students will learn and demonstrate the desired skills. Based on these assumptions, the following hypothesis was submitted for testing:

> Learning Disabled Junior high school students who use a self-evaluation checklist in structured classroom composition activities will have a significantly higher final mean rater assessment on INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT, CONTENT, CRAFT, and CONCLUDING STATEMENT than Learning Disabled students who do not use a self-evaluation checklist in structured classroom activities.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of the study consisted of 58 students from learning disabled classrooms in three public junior high schools in central South Carolina. Each of three teachers whose classes participated in the study provided composition instruction to both experimental and control subjects. The experimental and control groups consisted of 38 and 20 subjects respectively.

Procedure

It was a necessary requirement of the present study that only those junior high school learning disabled classes taught by teachers with formal training in special education be used. An additional designed requirement was that each qualified teacher instruct at least two composition classes comprised exclusively of learning disabled students. Contacts were made with several teachers referred to the researchers by the college instructors in the local area who had some

FORM 1

RATER'S EVALUATION SHEET

Comments	Designator	Skills Area
		Introduction Opening remarks Thesis Plan of Development (Optional)
		Content Topic Sentence (supporting point 1) Thesis Specific Evidence
		Topic Sentence (supporting point 3) Specific Evidence
		Conclusion Summary (optional) General Closing Remarks
		Craft Unit: all paragraphs support the thesis Coherence: clear method of organization; transition and other connecting words; effective introduction and conclusion Sentence Skills: Fragments, run-ons correct verb forms, subject-verb agreement, faculty parallelism and faculty modifiers, faculty pronouns, capital letters Punctuation marks where needed: apostrophe, quotation marks, commas, needless words, correct word choices, spelling errors, sentences varied

Rater's Name: _____ Students Name: _____

knowledge of the teacher's formal training and teaching responsibilities.

The three teachers who consented to participate were briefed on the purpose of the study, as well as the specific details regarding their roles in administering the instructional treatment required by the research model. Each teacher was given a set of reference materials on teaching learning disabled students, self-evaluation checklist for use with experimental subjects, a schedule indicating dates and procedures for delivery of pretest and post-test writing samples.

Instrumentation

Initially, experimental and control groups were asked to write a three to five paragraph essay. The teachers gave each group preliminary specifications for the content and structure of the composition. Specifications for the content included the following:

* What is your favorite activity used for relaxation?
* When you think of this activity, what is the first thing that comes to mind?
* List some other thoughts, ideas, and feelings that make this activity your favorite?
* Cite some reasons that make this activity enjoyable.
* How does this activity differ from other activities you enjoy doing?
* Explain why you feel more people should enjoy the activity?
* Give some clues or hints to encourage someone who has refused to engage in this activity.

The teachers were then instructed to explain the structure of the composition to the students, citing examples of each of the structural specification. Students were encouraged to analyze and discuss each paragraph for each specifications.

Structural specification included:

* INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

  The first paragraph introduces the reader to your topic
* BODY

  The middle paragraphs describe (in order) "why," "when," and "how" you engage in the activity.
* CONCLUDING STATEMENT

  The last paragraph summarizes the content of paragraphs, the introduction and explains why you feel more people should enjoy the activity and also gives clues or hints to encourage someone who has refused to engage in this activity.

Following completion of the writing activity, each of the experimental subjects were given a self-evaluation checklist, referred to hereafter as the SELF-EVALUATION GRID. Forms 2 a, b, c, d, e, f, and g, represent the comic pictorial integration of the grid. Copies of the completed pretest writing samples for both groups were returned to the researchers for coding and delivery to two external evaluators. Each evaluator was thoroughly familiar with the scales and criteria for rating each paper based on the four composition components as delineated on Form 3, Evaluation Grid Rating Form. A maximum of 25 points each was awarded for craft and concluding statement, while 20 and 30 points were awarded for the introductory statement and content respectively.

Subsequent instruction to both experimental and control groups was structured around the written composition rules implied in the Self-Evaluation Grid. The Self-Evaluation Grid, used exclusively with experimental subjects, is a revised version of the Self-Evaluation Checklist designed by the researchers and field tested on a sample of college freshmen (Small & Brantley, 1985). The revised form features notably more concise language than the initial form. A comic pictorial is mated with each checklist question, grouped under the headings, "Unity and Coherence," "Sentence Skills," and "Punctuation Marks." Comic pictorials were incorporated to enhance retention of desired elements of composition through object-concept association.

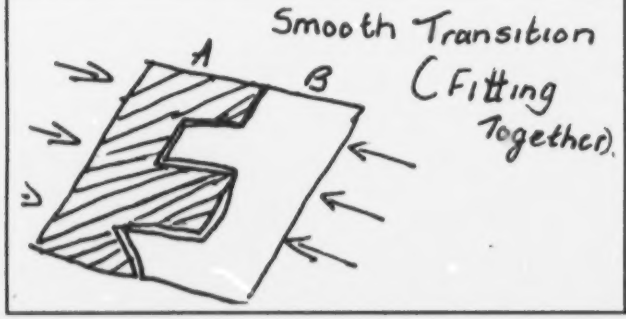
Each grid contains a self-rating scale for each of the four composition components. The maximum score across all components is 100 points. The components, Writing Craft and Conclusion Statement, each carry a maximum of 25 points, while the Introductory statement and content carry 20 and 30 points, respectively. The self-rating scales are identical to those used by the external evaluators.

After six weeks of instruction, experimental and control subjects were asked to write on any topic they desired. Again, they were reminded of the structural requirements of the paper and given instruction on the general method for formulating the thesis. Copies of the completed post-test writing samples were labeled to identify the groups and the papers were delivered to the researchers for analysis.

Findings

As shown in Table 1, no significant mean differences were found between experimental and control subjects on the pretest composition components. Post-test comparisons show significantly higher mean ratings for experimental subjects in every composition component, except Writing Craft, where the mean for experimental subjects was slightly higher, though not significantly so. Thus, the hypothesis that predicted experimental subjects would achieve higher final mean rating

SELF EVALUATION GRID - R

Unity Coherence		Comments		
		Yes	No	Unsure
	Is the introductory paragraph clear? Do you get the general idea of the kind of discussion that it follows?			
	Are ideas discussed in order? Do they fit together smoothly?			

SELF EVALUATION GRID

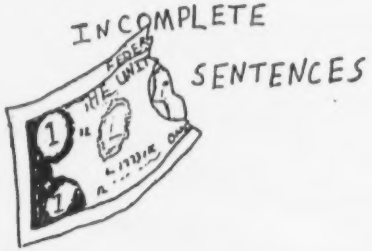
for
WRITING COMPOSITION

Skill Area	Ratings	Comments
<u>Paragraph I</u> Key idea or Central idea		
<u>Paragraph II</u> First major point with two or more supporting sentences relating to key ideas in paragraph I. <u>Paragraph III</u> Second major point with five to seven detailed sentences relating directly and clearly to paragraph II. <u>Paragraph IV</u> Third major point with several supporting sentences relating to paragraph III.		
Sum up or restate the key points of the essay in one paragraph using the essential points from paragraphs II, III, and IV using two or more related sentences.		

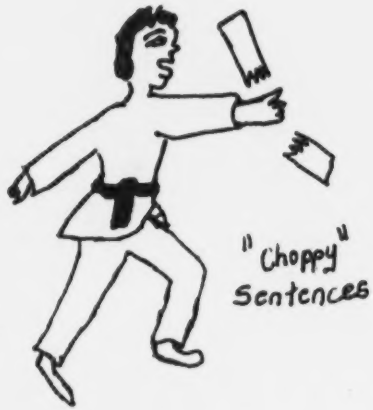
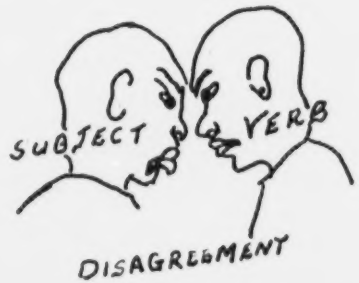
		Yes	No	Unsure
	Do all paragraphs support the main idea?			
	Are there any important ideas or points that seem to be missing in any paragraphs? (paragraphs 2, 3, and 4).			

		Yes	No	Unsure
	Is the conclusion statements (last paragraph) effective? Can you understand clearly what is being said? Are the conclusions supported by the statements in the paragraphs?			

10

Sentence Skills		Comments		
		Yes	No	Unsure
	Are there sentence fragments in any of the paragraphs?			
	Are there any sentences so long or "stingy" that you do not understand what is being said?			

11

		Yes	No	Unsure
	Are there any sentences to short or "choppy?"			
	Are there any sentences in which the subject and verb disagree?			

12

		Yes	No	Unsure
"DO NOT HAVE NO" DOUBLE NEGATIVES	Are there any double negatives used in any of the sentences?			
SPELLING ERRORS	Are there any spelling errors?			

13

Punctuation Marks		Comments		
		Yes	No	Unsure
	Are there any sentences that are not correctly punctuated? PERIOD . . COMMA , , EXCLAMATION MARK ! ! QUOTATION MARK " " APOSTROPHE ' ' (to show possession - Joe's or to combine a verb with a negative helping verb - don't)			
Yankee Stadium 	Are capital letters used where they are needed?			

FORM 3

EVALUATION GRID FORM

Subject: _____ Project: Composition

(L - Low H -High)

Literary Element	Rating Scale	Reasons for Rating	
		Plus	Minus
Introduction	0 5 10 15 20 L H		
Content	0 5 10 15 20 25 30 L H		
Craft	0 5 10 15 20 25 L H		
Conclusion	0 5 10 15 20 25 L H		

Table 1

T-test Comparison of Pretest Means of Experimental and Control Groups on Written Composition Variables

	Experimental Group (N = 21)		Control Group (N = 16)		t Value
Variables	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	
Introduction	8.57	3.92	8.75	6.71	0.100 (NS)
Content	18.81	6.50	17.19	4.46	0.102 (NS)
Craft	15.71	5.54	15.31	6.45	0.200 (NS)
Conclusion	14.29	3.96	16.25	4.28	1.440 (NS)

on Introductory Statement, Content, Writing Craft, and Conclusion Statement is partially supported. Table 2 shows postest means, standard deviation and F-ratios for the groups on each of the four composition components.

Pretest means of the experimental and control groups on the written composition variables were compared to determine the relative degree of initial differences. T-Test comparisons indicated no significant differences between the groups on any of the four variables measuring written composition skills, (16.25 compared with 14.29 for the experimental subjects; t=1.44).

Table 2 shows the pretest raw score means and percentage of mastery across the four dependent variables for the experimental and control groups. The average mastery percentages across the variables ranged from a low of 43% to a high of 65%. Both groups had the lowest degree of mastery in introduction (43% experimental group and 44%, control group). The highest level of mastery was achieved in conclusion by the control group (65%).

Post-test analyses using the t-test for independent samples revealed significant treatment effects on the introduction variable. The experimental group mean on the measures was 17.62 compared with 14.69 for the control group (t=1.92). The experimental group mean (24.76) on the content variable was slightly higher than that of the control group (22.5) though not significantly so. The groups were virtually equal on craft and conclusion. Table 3 shows t-test comparisons of the post-test means of the experimental and control groups on the four written composition variables.

The percentages of master across each written composition variable for the groups ranged from a low of 73% to a high of 88%. The mastery percentages for the experimental groups ranged from a low of 74% (craft) to a high of 88% (introduction). The mastery percentage for content and conclusion for the experimental group were 85% and 81% respectively as shown in Table 4. The experimental and control groups had relatively equal levels of mastery in craft and content.

Differences in percentage of mastery between the groups are apparent on introduction and content. The experimental groups achieve a percentage of mastery (88%) 15 percentage points higher than that for the control group (73%). Through the difference in mastery on content was not shown to be statistically significant as shown in Table 3, the percentage difference in favor of the experimental group was 10% (85% compared with 75%).

Both groups recorded significant gain on each of the four written composition variables as shown in Tables 5 and 6. The largest mean gains for the experimental group on introduction (9.05) and content (7.38), followed by conclusion (6.19) and craft (4.28). The largest mean gains for the control group were also on introduction and content with 5.94 each, followed by conclusion (4.237) and craft (4.06).

Table 2

Pretest Raw Score Means and Mean Mastery Percentages for Experimental and Control Groups on the Written Composition Variables

Variables	Experimental Group (N = 21)		Control Group (N = 16)	
	Raw Score Mean	Mean Mastery %	Raw Score Mean	Mean Mastery %
Introduction	8.57	43	8.75	44
Content	18.81	63	17.19	57
Craft	15.71	63	15.31	61
Conclusion	14.29	57	16.25	65

Table 3

T-test Comparison of Post-test Means of Experimental and Control Groups on Written Composition Variables

Variables	Experimental Group (N = 21)		Control Group (N = 16)		t Value
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	
Introduction	17.62	3.75	14.69	5.62	1.900 *
Content	24.76	5.36	22.50	4.08	1.400 (NS)
Craft	18.57	5.51	18.75	4.65	0.105 (NS)
Conclusion	20.24	4.32	20.00	5.16	0.154 (NS)

* Significant at $p \leq .05$, df = 35 One tail-test of significance

Table 4

Post-test Raw Score Means and Mean Mastery Percentages for Experimental and Control Groups on the Written Composition Variables

Variables	Experimental Group (N = 21)		Control Group (N = 16)	
	Raw Score Mean	Mean Mastery %	Raw Score Mean	Mean Mastery %
Introduction	17.62	88	14.69	73
Content	24.76	85	22.5	75
Craft	18.57	74	18.75	75
Conclusion	20.24	81	20.0	80

Table 5

T-test Comparison of Pretest and Post-test Means of the Experimental Group on Written Composition Variables

Variables	Means		Mean Difference	t Value
	Pre	Post		
Introduction	8.57	17.62	9.05	8.46 *
Content	18.81	24.76	7.38	4.31 **
Craft	15.71	18.57	4.28	3.17 ***
Conclusion	14.29	20.24	6.19	5.56

* Significant at $p \leq .0001$, (df = 20)

** Significant at $p \leq .001$

*** Significant at $p \leq .01$

Table 6

T-test Comparison of Pretest and Post-test Means of the Control Group on Written Composition Variables

Variables	Means		Mean Difference	t Value
	Pre	Post		
Introduction	8.75	14.69	5.94	4.84 **
Content	17.19	22.50	5.94	4.07 **
Craft	15.31	18.75	4.06	3.57 *
Conclusion	16.75	20.00	4.37	3.21 *

* Significant at $p \leq .001$,

** Significant at $p \leq .01$

Thus, both groups had very similar patterns of order of mean gains across the four variables, through the mean gains for the experimental group were generally greater than those of the control group.

Pretest and post-test percentage mastery gains for experimental and control groups shown in Table 7, indicate percentage of gain as high as 105% (experimental group, introduction) and as low as 17% (experimental group, craft). The experimental group average 49.7% mastery gains across all variables compared with 36% for the control group.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to determine whether use of the evaluation grid procedure in teaching written composition to learning disabled students would enhance their level of skill in composing essays beyond the level achieved by students taught without the grid. The results of the study indicate that the experimental group, who used the grid in general, were superior in their ability to the control group in their skills at introducing topic essay writing (introductory statement). The experimental group were also slightly superior in their ability to organize ideas in the body of the essay (content).

These results, though not totally as expected and inconclusive, may suggest that use of the evaluation grid procedure gives students a bit of an edge on students who did not use it. In the present study, only 37 subjects were used from two captive audiences. A larger study with more subjects and more groups needs to be performed to test the potency of the grid procedure across a more varied population. Though the results of this study should be taken with caution, the implementation of a grid procedure typically cost an instructor less than a ream of paper and very little processing time. Moreover, the process is embedded in fairly sound learning theory. That is, the procedure is systematic -- organized, which may enhance metacognitive and mental information processing self-directed learners and careful decision makers. The procedure promotes a positive attitude in students -- they recognize their weak points and their strong points.

Future study should incorporate other measures designed to determine what student impressions are after using the grid method as well as enlarging the sample size and the accessible population.

Table 7

Pretest Post-test Percentages of Mastery Gains for Experimental and Control Groups

Written Composition Variables	Experimental Group			Control Group		
	Pretest Mean %	Post-test Mean %	Ratio of Mastery Gain	Pretest Mean %	Post-test Mean %	Ratio of Mastery Gain
Introduction	43	88	105	44	73	66
Content	63	85	35	57	75	32
Craft	63	74	17	61	75	23
Conclusion	57	81	42	65	80	23
Average Total			49.7			36

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